

by **Stefan Molyneux**

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At the end of my article "[Forget the Argument from Efficiency](#)," I promised to write about the argument from morality – which is also, in my view, how we will win – and so here it is.

The argument from morality is the most powerful tool in any freedom-lovers arsenal – but also the most personally costly, since it draws lines in relationships that can never be erased. The argument from morality can cost you friends, family, community – and so approach it with courage, and understand that, once you decide to use it, your life will never again be the same.

Simply put, the argument from morality is the most powerful approach to changing society because all major social decisions are made on the basis of ethics. If a population believes that a certain program is *moral* – i.e. war, welfare, social security and so on – then they may grumble, but they will also roll up their sleeves, get to work and support it no matter what their personal cost. Men will go off to war, mothers will turn their kids over to nannies, people will surrender massive portions of their income and freedom with nary a protest – all in the name of what is *good*.

Redefining "the good" is very, very hard. Throughout their lives, people make thousands of decisions based on certain moral principles – and if it turns out that those principles were *wrong*, then they will be forced to admit that their whole lives have been spent in the service of falsehood, or corruption, or evil – and that is more than most people can stomach. In order to preserve their illusions of goodness, they will fight any close examination of moral principles almost to the death!

Morality is a fairly complex subject, of course, but it suffices here to say that morality must be based on a universal and logically-consistent set of principles – if it is just a matter of opinion, then no course of action can be "better" than any other course of action – any more than liking blue is "better" than liking red.

Most people believe that their decisions are based on a consistent set of moral principles, but those moral principles – as Socrates discovered millennia ago – crumble within minutes under any rigorous logical examination. I have found that the most effective approach is to be curious and persistent – but not be afraid to call a spade a spade.

To begin, there are really only three principles to remember when using the argument from morality:

1. Nothing exists except people.

There is no such thing as "the government," or a "country," or "society." All these terms for social aggregations are merely conceptual labels for individuals. "The government" never does anything – only people *within* the government act. Thus the "government" – since it is a concept – has no reality, ethical rights or moral standing. Moral rules apply to *people*, not *concepts*. If anyone argues with you about this, just ask them to show you their "family" without showing you any individual people. They'll get the point.

2. What is good for one must be good for all.

Moral beliefs, in order to rise above mere opinion, must be applicable to everyone. There is no logically consistent way to say that Person A *must* do X, but Person Y must *never* do X. If an action is termed "good," then it must be good for *all people*. If I classify the concept "mammal" as "warm-blooded," then it must include *all* warm-blooded organisms – otherwise the concept is meaningless. The concept "good" must thus encompass the preferred behaviour for *all people* – not just "Orientals" or "Policemen" or "Americans." If it doesn't, then it's just an aesthetic or cultural penchant, like preferring hockey to football, and loses any power for universal prescription. Thus if it is "good" for a politician to use force to take money from you and give it to me, then it is also "good" for anyone else to do it.

3. What is bad for one must be bad for all.

Conversely, if it is wrong for me to go and steal money from someone else, then it is wrong for *anyone* to go and steal money from *anyone* else. If shooting a man who is not threatening you is evil in Atlanta, then it is also evil in Iraq. If being paid to go and shoot someone is wrong for a hit man, then it is also wrong for a soldier. If breaking into a peaceful citizen's house, kidnapping him and holding him prisoner is wrong for you and me, then it is also wrong for the agents of the DEA.

Thus far, the argument from morality is very similar to the argument from consistency. The argument from morality comes in by stating that, if it is wrong or evil for me to rob Peter to pay Paul, then it is wrong or evil for anyone – including politicians – to do it. Thus a man who defends state welfare programs, for instance, can only do so on the grounds of personal preference, but he *cannot* claim that it is moral. In fact, he must admit that, on the basis of any universal principles, the welfare state is *immoral*, since if it is wrong for anyone to steal, then it is also wrong for *everyone* to steal – including politicians!

Using the above principles, here are some examples of arguments from morality:

Gun Control

If owning guns is bad, then it is bad for everyone. Guns, then, *should* be banned. Thus policemen and soldiers must give up their weapons. If policemen and soldiers need guns to protect themselves from dangerous criminals, why not ordinary citizens? Does that mean that possessing guns is sometimes good and sometimes bad? What is the difference? Remember – there is no such thing as "a policeman" or "a soldier" – those are mere concepts. Only *people* exist, and if gun ownership is a good idea for a soldier, but a bad idea for a private citizen, what happens to the soldier when he goes on leave? Does his nature change somehow, so that now he no longer has the right to own a gun? What about when a policeman changes out of his uniform? Does he change in some fundamental manner, and so loses the right to be armed? Is it only his uniform that has the right to carry a gun? What if someone else puts on that uniform? Of course, these questions cannot be answered, and so the whole argument for gun control becomes logically foolish. People will then turn to the argument from *effect* – i.e. general gun ownership leads to increased violence – which can also be easily countered. If gun ownership leads to increased violence, then surely the cops and soldiers will become increasingly violent if they alone have guns. Since dictatorships and war are worse than crime (because you can defend yourself against criminals, but not governments), then surely that is an argument *against* only allowing people who work for the state to carry guns. Thus a person can only argue against gun ownership from a subjective "me no like" perspective – which is a perfect time to explain how the stateless free market can grant him his wish!

War

The ability to wage war requires that politicians retain the right to steal from certain citizens to pay other citizens to murder people. In other words, George Bush must be able to steal from some Americans to pay other Americans to go murder Iraqis. Of course, if Bush is allowed to do this, why is *only* Bush allowed to do this? Why am I not allowed to do this? Why does the government make it illegal for anyone else (i.e. the Mafia) to do this? Why is it only good for people wearing certain clothing to be hired on as murderers? Also – if the government can steal from citizens to pay soldiers to shoot Iraqis because Iraqis are a threat, then what about the stealing that pays for it all? Isn't the government itself the greatest threat to me, since it robs me at gunpoint to pay for a war which encourages terrorism? If it is moral to rob me to pay people to kill those who threaten me, aren't I morally required to hire mercenaries to shoot those who come to rob me in the first place? If it's bad for *me* to do that, why is it not bad for *Bush* to do that? What is the difference between me and Bush? Are we some kind of different species? If not, then why do we have such diametrically opposite moral commandments? (Here, people will often talk about our "voluntary transfer" of moral authority to the government, but then state force is not required, and so taxation can be eliminated without effect.)

Minimum Wage

If Person A can shoot Person B for not paying Person C enough, why can Person C not also do that? Why can I not do that, if I think my wages should be higher? Why do some people have the right to supplement their income with violence and others do not?

Also, what exactly is the moral difference between \$5 and \$5.15 per hour? Why is one an evil to be punished and the other not? Does the extra fifteen cents turn the first five dollars from an evil into a good? Does it change the nature of the first five dollars somehow? Also, if it is moral to use violence to increase one's income, can people on welfare shoot government officials if they want more money? What about people on social security? If not, why not?

Government Parks

If one person (say, Bill Clinton), can draw on a map and transfer the ownership of the property he outlines in perpetuity, why only Clinton? Why can't I do that? If Clinton can pay state troopers to shoot those who trespass on property he has never visited, can anyone do that?

Drugs

The war on drugs is based on the principle that Bob can decide what Sally may do to her own body in the privacy of her own home. Why *only* Bob then? Why cannot Sally also decide what Bob may do in the privacy of his own home? And are drugs illegal because they are always bad? But they are not always bad – no more than alcohol. Ever listen to Sergeant Pepper's? What about Pink Floyd? Bohemian Rhapsody? Chet Baker? Ray Charles? Beautiful stuff. All composed on hard drugs. Is it the self-destructive excess that is bad? But it is not the excess that is bad, but even occasional recreational use. Then that must mean that *all* behaviour that can lead to self-destructive excess must be banned. Working can lead to workaholism. Going to the gym can lead to compulsive exercise. Desserts can lead to obesity. Credit cards can lead to excessive debt. All these things must then be banned – which leads to a logical contradiction. If all activities which can lead to abusive excesses must be banned, then what about the government itself? Is it not an abusive excess to have a government with the terrible power to monitor and punish just about every aspect of citizens' lives? And finally, what about the budget of the DEA itself? Hundreds of billions of dollars have been wasted in the war on drugs, just to raise profits for criminals and government agencies and chain millions of people in the drug gulags – is that not a textbook example of "abusive excess?" What about government deficits and debts in general? What about the government's excellent adventures in foreign

policy? Its habit of arming and funding foreign dictators? Training and supporting Bin Laden? Giving aid and military helicopters to Saddam Hussein? Invading Iraq? Are they not the greatest and most egregious examples of an excess of self-destructive behaviour? Aren't the inevitable brutalities of state power – which truly harm the innocent – far more destructive than smoking a joint? If not, why not?

The State

Certain people calling themselves "the state" claim the moral right to use force against other people – a moral right, they claim, that is based on elections. Very well – all we have to do is ask which moral principle justifies this rather startling right. The answer we will get is: *when the majority of people choose a leader, then everyone has to submit to that leader*. Excellent! Then we must ask if senators and congressmen ever defy their party leader. If they do, then aren't they acting immorally? Their party has chosen a leader – don't they then have to obey that person? If *they* don't, then why do we? Also, if the principle is that the majority can impose the leader's decisions on the minority, why is that only the case for the government? What about women, who outnumber men? What about employees, who outnumber managers? And last but not least, what about voters, who outnumber politicians? If the majority should forcibly impose its will on the minority, shouldn't we all have the ability to throw politicians in jail if they don't do what we want? What if atheists outnumber Christians in a certain town? Can they ban churches? Can Mormon wives "outvote" their husbands? Students in universities outnumber professors – can they then threaten jail for bad marks? Patients outnumber doctors, prisoners outnumber jailers – the list goes on and on. If the moral theory of "majority rule" is valid, then it must be valid for *all* situations. If not, then it is a pure evil, since it supports the use of all the ghastly horrors of the state – theft, kidnapping, imprisonment – and sometimes, as we all know, torture and execution. Thus the moral theory which justifies and *demand*s the exercise of such terrible power better be pretty damn airtight – and as you can see, it is riddled with nonsense.

When you present the above contradictions, if your listener cannot resolve them – and trust me, he won't be able to – then he has to admit that, until they are resolved, he has no moral basis for his beliefs. He can still hold his beliefs, of course, but he cannot claim that they represent any universal principles – they're just little personal preferences – like if he said that he liked muffins more than doughnuts. He has no right to impose such personal preferences on others – and certainly no right to champion them as state policy. Ask him if he will refrain from advocating his preferences until he solves the problem of universal application. If he says yes, then ask him if he will also oppose such state policies until he solves the problem. If yes, congratulations! Baptize him an anarchist and send him out to spread the word! If not, then tell him that if he continues to advocate what he knows to be false – or at best questionable – then he is a hypocrite.

I know, it doesn't sound very nice, but really – we are facing people advocating the total power of the state – is sparing the feelings of those arming our enemies to be our main concern? The ideal of freedom deserves defenders made of slightly sterner stuff.

I'm sure the basis for the argument from morality is fairly clear now – and so now, with some practice in the Socratic method of "blank slate" premise-questioning, you are poised to become an expert in the destruction of false morality.

A word of caution, however. As Socrates himself found, the decision to deploy the argument from morality should not be taken lightly. Asking fundamental moral questions makes many people become frightened, scornful or outright hostile. It is though, in my view, the only way that we can win the fight for freedom. Since society makes all of its fundamental decisions based on moral premises, our only chance for success is to undermine and change those moral premises – which requires the skillful, persistent and consistent application of the argument from morality. For too long we have been on the defensive, crying our truths from lonely peaks – and all too often, only to each other. It is time that we took the offensive, and

began to cross-examine those who are so sure of their right to use violence to achieve their ends. It will not be easy – and here I speak from personal experience – but it is essential. It is right and good to ask such questions – and, if you decide that you are brave and strong enough to start using the argument from morality, you will have already joined that tiny group of honest thinkers that have forever saved mankind.

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